R E P O R T R E S U M E S

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LINGUISTICS AND WRITTEN COMPOSITION.

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NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENG.,CHAMPAIGN,ILL

PUB DATE 63

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.60 13P.

DESCRIPTORS- *APPLIED LINGUISTICS, *COMPOSITION (LITERARY), *LINGUISTICS, *RHETORIC, SENTENCE STRUCTURE, COMPOSITION SKILLS (LITERARY), PARAGRAPH COMPOSITION, PUNCTUATION, STRUCTURAL GRAMMAR, TRANSFORMATION GENERATIVE GRAMMAR, TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR, WRITING SKILLS, SENTENCES,

THE DESCRIPTIVE SCIENCE OF LINGUISTICS AND THE SKILL OF WRITTEN COMPOSITION MEET IN THE "SENTENCE," AND THE INFORMATION WHICH LINGUISTICS PROVIDES ON SENTENCE STRUCTURE CAN AID THE TEACHER OF COMPOSITION. ALTHOUGH TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR DOES NOT IMPROVE A STUDENT'S WRITING, CONSTITUENT GRAMMAR AND TRANSFORMATIONAL GRAMMAR, BY PRESENTING METHODS OF ANALYZING AND ORGANIZING SENTENCES, ENABLE THE STUDENT TO FAMILIARIZE HIMSELF WITH THE BASIC FORMS AND ELEMENTS OF THE SENTENCE. THROUGH PRACTICE, A STUDENT'S "REPLACEMENT POTENTIAL" (THE RANGE OF POSSIBILITIES HE HAS AVAILABLE FOR A GIVEN SLOT IN A SENTENCE) IS INCREASED, AND HE LEARNS THE MANIPULATION AND GROUPING OF SENTENCE PARTS. AS HIS OBJECTIVE APPRECIATION OF SENTENCE STRUCTURE AND ITS VARIATIONS GROWS, HE ACQUIRES A CONCEPT OF CONSTRUCTION WHICH CAN BE APPLIED TO GROUPS OF SENTENCES AS WELL AS GROUPS OF WORDS, AND CONSEQUENTLY IS BETTER ABLE TO WRITE UNIFIED PARAGRAPHS AND PAPERS. THUS, ALTHOUGH LINGUISTICS PROPER IS NOT CAPABLE OF DEALING WITH UNITS OF COMPOSITION LARGER THAN THE SENTENCE, THE APPROACHES DEVELOPED BY LINGUISTS FOR STUDYING SENTENCES CAN AID THE STUDENT OF COMPOSITION TO IMPROVE HIS WRITING SKILLS. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "LANGUAGE, LINGUISTICS, AND SCHOOL PROGRAMS, PROCEEDINGS OF THE SPRING INSTITUTES, 1963." CHAMPAIGN, ILL., NCTE, 1963.) (LH)

LANGUAGE, LINGUISTICS, AND SCHOOL PROGRAMS

ED020167

Proceedings of the Spring Institutes, 1963

of the

National Council of Teachers of English

Bernard J. Weiss

Director

Louisville, Ky.

March 3-9

Atlantic City, N. J.

April 21-27

TE000 444

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

508 South Sixth Street Champaign, Illinois

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LINGUISTICS AND WRITTEN COMPOSITION

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From the title assigned to me for this talk I at first inferred that today I was to have a role very common in our society, especially in government and education. Since the title joins *linguistics* and *written composition* by a simple and noncommittal *and*, I figured that my job here is that of a co-ordinator. I am to co-ordinate linguistics and composition. Second thought, however, suggested that since actually *and*, as a co-ordinating conjunction, is doing the co-ordinating, all that I am to do is to help *and* do its work. This makes me a kind of subordinate co-ordinator. And since presumably this is a rather unusual operation, or we wouldn't bother to deal with it here at all, I am perhaps even an inordinate subordinate co-ordinator.

Actually, since linguistics is a scientific discipline and written composition is an art—at least a skill—, perhaps co-ordination is not what is called for. If we make *and* somewhat less noncommittal, we see that our concern is whether there is any relationship at all between linguistics and composition, and, if so, what it is. Perhaps what we are after is rather like this: The Application of Linguistics to the Teaching of Written Composition. I'm going to assume that this is what is meant; if so, here is a title we can do something with, get our teeth into.

Is There a Relationship?

Perhaps. Not everyone would agree. Recently Professor Paul Roberts, whose name and books surely have been mentioned frequently during the first days of this institute, has said several times that linguistics has no appreciable relationship to composition. At the 1962 Thanksgiving convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, Roberts, briefly in this country during his current assignment in Rome, said this: "What linguistics does offer to departments of English is a subject matter. . . . Linguistics has no magic way of making writers out of non-readers."

I am glad, of course, to find Roberts on the side of the angels when it comes to insisting that the language itself is a proper subject for English classes. And I am glad to find, I think, that actually there is little disagreement over this matter of composition. Two

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years ago, in a Harper and Brothers house publication, Roberts specifically indicated that by "composition" he refers to units larger than the sentence. If so, then we have simply a difference in definition. Roberts would include consideration of the paragraph and larger units; I think that usage, however, includes also the sentence. From my shelves I pull down at random various freshman textbooks. Here is Gregory and Jordan's *College Composition*, with Chapter 7, "The Sentence." Here is Brooks and Warren's *Modern Rhetoric*, with Chapter 8, "The Sentence." A similar chapter appears in Taft, McDermott, Jenson, and Kaplan's *The Technique of Composition*, where it bears the subtitle, "Structure determines meaning." A chapter on the sentence is likewise in Geist and Summer's *Current English Composition*. Lest we think that this is a recent development, let's look at some older books. Here's Blanchard's *Art of Composition* in 1934, with Chapter 8, "The Art of Writing Sentences." Here's the old favorite, Thomas, Manchester, and Scott, with Chapter 4 given over to "The Sentence." Still older is the famous Genung's *Art of Rhetoric*, in 1900, with Chapter 10 unequivocally titled "The Sentence." Clearly teachers of composition have included within the scope of the term the art of composing sentences.

Since Roberts himself has written three books, two for high school and one for college freshmen, intended at least in part to help students write better sentences through the use of linguistic information, then there is no disagreement here. I think that we can go further and suggest that even for teaching the larger units of prose form linguistics may not be irrelevant, despite Roberts's denial.

Looking at the Sentence and Grammar

Let's begin, then, with the sentence. Can we help students to write better sentences by applying knowledge drawn from linguistics? After the talks and discussions earlier this week I scarcely need to affirm that we are not now considering the use of traditional grammar. A number of studies back in the 1920's demonstrated pretty convincingly that a knowledge of traditional Greco-Latinate grammar, often called formal grammar, not only failed to improve a student's ability in composition; sometimes it actually caused deterioration through the imposition of unnatural standards.

No wonder, of course. It is difficult to conceive just how a boy or girl will learn to write better through being told that a sentence is a group of words expressing a complete thought, when neither he nor the teacher, nor anyone else, can identify the completeness

of a thought. It is difficult to conceive how a student will learn to write better through memorizing a statement that a preposition is a part of speech that shows the relation of one word to another, when even 80 I.Q. Johnny can see that in such an expression as *Bill kicked me* the relationship between *Bill* and *me* is shown by *kicked*. It is difficult to conceive how a student will learn to write better through diagraming sentences by ignoring their actual structure and rearranging their parts according to some superimposed logical pattern. No, grammatical definitions that do not define and practices that deny language reality can hardly be a basis for any improvement in the use of language. Though the teacher may still need to know something about this formal grammar as history, there is no longer any valid reason for its use in the schools.

We do have something else. To replace formal traditional grammar, linguistics makes available two new ways of approaching our language—what elsewhere I have called Grammar C and Grammar D. Grammar C as you know is sometimes called structural grammar, because of its essential principle that the study of language begins with the features of form and structure, then proceeds to the use or function of these features, and only then goes on to the consideration of the meaning. Grammar C gives us a prime understanding of the distinctive sound units of English, including the contrastive signal features of stress and pitch and what the linguist calls juncture. It provides a generally clear-cut classification of the meaningful units of the language, including the so-called parts of speech. It distinguishes between the meaningful parts of speech and those words, not more than two hundred, which operate primarily as signals of structural relationship. Grammar C also provides clear and consistent descriptions of the four basic structural patterns of English and of the substitution potential within the patterns. Finally, Grammar C offers a new approach to the understanding of the framework of the sentence itself through an analysis quite different from old-fashioned diagraming. This approach recognizes a hierarchy of relationships within the sentence, and helps us to see those relationships through the application of the theory of immediate constituents. This theory finds the typical English sentence composed of two constituents. If one of these is more than a single word, then it is analyzable upon the next level as also being composed of two constituents, and so on until the ultimate single-word constituents are reached.

It is true, though, that in this last contribution to our understanding of English Grammar C ran into difficulties. The theory

of immediate constituents worked pretty well as long as the constituents behaved in an orderly fashion, that is, as long as one followed another on the same level. But even a simple question like *Haven't you eaten yet?* posed a problem in analysis, since clearly *have* and *eaten* are one structural item, the verb, and yet they are not in sequence. Nor did inventing a name for this kind of thing, "discontinuous constituent," really solve the problem. Worse, as Professor Robert Lees of the University of Illinois has pointed out, even on a linear basis the theory of immediate constituents was unable to explain satisfactorily such sentences as *Napoleon compelled the enemy to retreat* and *I thought it was the Smiths.*

These, and a great many other structural features of English sentences, are now becoming understandable through the rapidly developing research in still another approach to our language, transformation grammar. In contrast to the analytical basis of structural grammar or Grammar C, this new grammar, which we might also distinguish as Grammar D, considers any and all English sentences capable of being generated by a finite set of explicit and rigorously applied rules. The few simple or basic types of sentences are combinable through transformation rules into all the remaining possible sentences. Take, for example, the Napoleon sentence of Lees. Transformation grammar would consider that two basic sentences *Napoleon compelled X* and *The enemy retreated* resulted from the application of generative rules from the simplex S, and that then transformation rules were applied to combine these into the final transform *Napoleon compelled the enemy to retreat.*

Using Constituent and Transformation Grammar

Although in this talk about all I can do is to make statements without much explanation, I can offer as my own conviction that Grammar C and D, working not to the exclusion of each other but rather as complements of each other, do provide for us sound, rich, and increasingly more precise ways of dealing with the extraordinary complexity of English syntax. I say "increasing," because, although immediate constituent grammar seems to have been utilized to its limit, transformation grammar is still the object of great research activity, particularly at such centers as Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Ohio State University, and the University of Illinois. But already enough is available, through the original presentation in Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* in 1957 and in some subsequent research studies, to be of material help to the teacher.

Admittedly these two grammars, C and D, can be of help to the textbook writer and the teacher who want to provide accurate information about what can go on inside English sentences. But can this information help the student write a better sentence?

It is a truism among linguists that a preschool child has learned automatic control of the basic structures and sentence patterns of the language. This truism has been misunderstood by some teachers of English who look at high school and college freshman themes and conclude that many of their students don't seem to have much control of anything in the language. Actually, even the worst of these students do have control of the basic structures. That is, they put the subject before the verb and say *The car skidded,* not *Skidded the car.* They put an adjective before a noun and say *cold water,* not *water cold.* They put the complement after the verb and say *We had some hamburgers,* not *We some hamburgers had.* What they don't control is what I call the replacement potential.

Professor Charles C. Fries, in his *American English Grammar* in 1940, reached an important conclusion after his examination of thousands of letters written by people of all degrees of education and in all varieties of occupations and social conditions. His conclusion was that what distinguishes the writing of educated people in general from the writing of the uneducated is not the absence of so-called ungrammatical forms like *you was* and *he ain't done nothing.* Rather it is that the educated writer has greater control of the syntactic resources of the language. For a given slot in a sentence he can, for example, choose freely from a wide range of possibilities; a simple noun, an infinitive, a gerund, a clause, a noun with premodifiers, a noun with post-modifiers, even an adverb. This is what I mean by the replacement potential. The uneducated writer simply is unaware of that potential, and has had no experience in drawing upon it.

Now just as we learn the basic control intuitively as children, so I would insist that we can learn some control of the replacement potential through school instruction, if that instruction is premised upon sound linguistic information. My insistence is founded upon empirical evidence and *a priori* assumptions, I grant. But until we have clear evidence to the contrary, it would seem to be a highly reasonable assumption that pedagogically sound practice in drawing upon the replacement potential would tend to produce this greater control. Of course, we need that evidence. Here is an area of greatly needed research. Professor Richard Braddock of the University of Iowa, with a helping committee, is now completing an exhaustive

study of modern research in the teaching of composition which has uncovered no major reliable research yet done to test that assumption. In the meantime, however, we must in all conscience and in justice to our students act as if the assumption were true.

Indeed, testimony from individual teachers derived from their experience in using the books of Paul Roberts provides empirical support for this assumption about developing control of replacement potential. In his first book, *Patterns of English* in 1956, he drew upon the content of structural linguistics in devising a series of exercises for improving sentence production. At that time his device was practice in constructing sentences according to structure formulas. In his next high school textbook, *English Sentences,* which came out only last year, Roberts turns to transformation grammar and attempts a kind of practical synthesis of it and structural grammar. Although his attempt has been criticized as premature in view of the early stage of development of transformation grammar, the book is certainly ingenious. Most of his exercises are for recognition and identification, but he also has this type: "By using the modification devices explained in the last few chapters, expand each of the sentence patterns given below to sentences of fifteen words or more." This type of exercise develops familiarity with the variety of structural replacements. Another and necessary type of exercise would be one asking for expansion of a single pattern by running the gamut of the replacement potential within a single slot or structural position.

The Problem of Rhetoric

I should like to say that by referring to variety I do not necessarily mean what in composition textbooks is often termed sentence variation. It seems to be traditional for teachers of composition to insist upon "variation" in student writing, particularly with reference to the beginning of sentences. A recent article in *College English,* actually providing a formula for such variation, so bemused Professor Francis Christensen of the University of Southern California that he made a quantitative study of the practice of good writers. His findings, due to be published in the same journal, indicate that these good writers cheerfully violate the formula and imply that if one follows the formula he does not actually produce good writing. In conclusion, Christensen calls for a rhetoric that will deal with sentence elements functionally–i.e., linguistically, so that "the variety will be allowed to grow from the materials and the effort to communicate them to the reader."

Now I think that Christensen has in mind essentially what I am here suggesting, that the student be made thoroughly familiar with the sentence elements, that is the replacement potential of the English sentence. Only after the student has attained this familiarity, through identification, recognition, and carefully planned practice, can he then go on to the rhetorical problem. Rhetoric deals with the art of choosing from among the available forms those which are most appropriate at a given time. But rhetorical effectiveness is contingent upon knowledge of what is available and of how to use it. This, then, is where linguistics can be applied.

It seems to me that linguistic knowledge of the structure of the sentence can also be useful as a common ground when the teacher is helping the student to revise his writing. One difficulty with the traditional grammatical analysis and terminology is precisely that it persistently confuses form and meaning. Since the writer's problem is to effect an appropriate correlation between form and meaning, and since we almost inevitably tend to think in terms of our vocabulary, it is very difficult to discuss his composition weaknesses intelligently when our critical terms are themselves ambiguous.

Let me take an example from a Minnesota freshman theme: "Later on we made a list of all the words which are pronounced the same and are spelled differently each having a different meaning."

Now a student who had had years of sound composition teaching through linguistic structures probably would not produce such a sentence in the first place. But let's assume that this student is just being introduced now to some structural facts about the sentence. Not always could much time and effort be spent upon a single sentence, but here a close analysis, in conference, would tend to prevent the student from committing similar confusion.

The structure indicates that *are pronounced the same* and *are spelled differently* are of equal rank; the particular joining signal *and* further tells us that these two are to be added to each other as contributing toward some kind of larger unity. Yet the lexical meanings of *same* and *differently* contradict the usual structural meaning of *and*. So we replace *and* by *but*.

Each having a different meaning could be an absolute construction in form. Its position suggests otherwise, however. If we put it in the usual position of a sentence modifier, then we have *Each having a different meaning, later on we made a list of words,* etc., and that clearly won't help. The lexical meaning suggests that perhaps *each* is intended to be in apposition with *words,* distant as

it is and inconsistent in grammatical number as it is, or perhaps with *which*, almost as distant. The lexical meaning of *different* directs us also to *spelled differently*, which in turn seems to parallel somehow having a *different meaning*. Perhaps we'd first better use a structural signal that shows this, the signal *and*, together with a similarity in form for the verb *have:*

> Later on we made a list of all the words which are pronounced the same but are spelled differently and have different meanings.

This is better. The structure itself now introduces the idea of pronunciation and then contrasts it with the spelling and the meanings. But since we normally expect different words to have different meanings anyway, our interest is really not in this point at all but rather is in the similarity of pronunciation. So next we reverse the order and thus put the pronunciation item in climactic position.

> Later on we made a list of all the words which are spelled differently and have different meanings but are pronounced the same.

This is still better. But we still have *differently* and *different* representing coordinate (here actually similar) ideas but lacking the same structural rank. So we change again and come up with:

> Later on we made a list of all the words which have different spellings and different meanings but are pronounced the same.

This is probably an improvement, but these full constructions don't carry out the contrast indicated by *but;* and, further, we probably don't now need the two *different*'s. Let's try:

> Later on we made a list of all the words which have different spellings and meanings but have the same pronunciation.

The contrast now can be pointed up by changing the structural contrasting features and, while we are at it, we might remove the hyperbolic *all*. Here are three possibilities:

> Later on we made a list of words which have different spellings and meanings but which have the same pronunciation.
>
> Later on we made a list of words which, though with different spellings and meanings, still have the same pronunciation.
>
> Later on we made a list of words with different spellings and meanings but with the same pronunciation.

To make a choice among these equally clear three sentences we have to leave the field of syntax and go to rhetoric. And even this field, I might add, has been looked upon as one in which its historically subjective judgments might become susceptible to objective criterions. Professor John B. Carroll of Harvard said at the CCCC meeting in Chicago last year that psychology must concern itself with not only what the basic sentences are and to what grammatical transformations they are subject, but also what motivates the selection of those basic sentences and their transformation.

Someone in this audience may already have noticed a little while ago that in dealing with that sentence I was deliberately adhering to its general framework in order to use it as an example of linguistic applications. We, and the student, could have saved a lot of time if he had written simply: *We made a list of homophones.* But then I would have had to use another example.

Now in that long analysis I have suggested a point-by-point procedure that has the same function as slowly walking through a new dance step. Even in revision the student, once he has been helped to look at his sentences in cold blood like this, will learn to shortcut the process.

For high school students Professor Verna Newsome suggests a similar procedure in her little book *Structural Grammar in the Classroom.* A simple example is offered by her suggestion to what the student can do with these successive sentences:

> "These blizzards killed or maimed men and women.
> These men and women were unfortunate enough to be
> caught in the blizzards."

To the student Professor Newsome says, change the second sentence into an adjective-headed structure modifying *men* and *women* in the first sentence. So by applying a Chomsky transformation rule, without his technical terminology, she helps the student to produce *These blizzards killed or maimed the men and women unfortunate enough to be caught in them.*

Clearly a similar approach is possible on even the elementary level. During the next few years we can expect to see suitable classroom materials and textbooks which aid the elementary teacher in using this approach to sentence composition and sentence improvement.

Suprasegmented Features and Punctuation

There is one other feature of sentence writing which might be looked at sidewise in passing, although strictly speaking it is not relevant to composition as such. That is punctuation.

There is, frankly, some difference of opinion as to the extent to which knowledge of spoken structural signals can be applied to punctuation, but certainly a rather strong consensus recognizes three significant points of application. One of them is the end of a sentence, a place where a great many students run the red light by using no punctuation or at least try to get by with the "rolling stop" of a comma. If a phonological sentence is defined as a stretch of speech ending in a final intonation contour marked by /↗/ or /↘/ (rising or falling juncture), then the student simply needs to recognize overtly when he hears or uses these contours. Although no athlete myself, some years ago I must say that I was largely instrumental in winning most of Minnesota's Big Ten baseball games through helping an ineligible star player finally pass his freshman course (in his sophomore year!). A shortstop who soon went on to the major leagues, this fellow had previously punctuated by dropping commas at random. A period he used only at the end of a theme. But in conferences he finally learned to identify his rising and falling contours, and on his impromptu theme, half of the final examination, there was not a single sentence punctuation error.

Recognition of the stress and pitch features, what the linguist dignified as suprasegmental morphemes, will also prevent the student from making another common punctuation error, that of not setting off nonrestrictive modifiers of one kind or another.

And if, like standard magazines but unlike the daily press, we insist upon the comma before *and* in a series as a preventive of possible ambiguity, then we have a third place in which the suprasegmentals can help, for this position is signaled by the same juncture which signals the preceding breaks in the series (e.g., copper, iron, gold, and some aluminum).

Tackling the Larger Units

So far we have been treating the sentence. Earlier I said that perhaps even for larger stretches of discourse linguistics might provide some help to the writer. In a general way I would suggest that the teacher might well build upon the student's new and sharper awareness of the concept of structure in the sentence. As the student gains an objective appreciation of sentence structure, of beginning and ending, of inner coherence, he acquires a concept which should

be easily transferable to his understanding of groups of sentences, whether discrete groups or paragraphs within a still larger structure. I quite agree with Paul Roberts that the teaching of composition has all too often offered unnecessary and unrealistic prescriptions about paragraph writing, including even the injunction to use a topic sentence. But this is not to deny, nor does he deny, that there actually is, in good writing, evidence of what rhetoricians long have called coherence and unity. The basic concept of sentence structure is applicable to the larger unit, too.

But much more specifically I would point to the aid which a knowledge of sentence structure, and of the syntactic potential in particular, can provide in obtaining desired coherence. This is the kind of aid which Professor Fries describes in his *The Structure of English* and which MacCurdy Burnet exemplifies in his classroom exercise detailed in an article in *College English* several years ago. Burnet follows Fries in leading the students to identify "sames" or similar structures having common referents in successive sentences. Through such exercise work with what Burnet designates as a kind of rhetorical "glue" which binds sentences together, students, he says, can develop their own descriptive rhetoric and thus help themselves "to write papers that more people want to read."

My own experience, over a number of years with at least some time devoted to teaching in the freshman course, bears out Burnet's feeling that this use of "sames" is a major contribution to good writing. Before I ever heard of linguistics I used to attack this problem by writing "Transition" in the margin of a theme, and by putting on the board a list of transition words the class was supposed to memorize. Even with this crude help student papers did improve. Just as surgery replaced the barber's razor with scores of special scalpels, so linguistics now provides new and better tools for improving the student's ability to "glue" his sentences to other sentences in connected discourse. And with this help I would agree with Burnet that even greater improvement can result.

I do not believe, however, that we yet have the best possible means of applying linguistic procedures to the teaching of composition in large units. A few years ago Professor Zellig Harris of the University of Pennsylvania took a first step in applying linguistic analysis to such larger units when he engaged in what is known as "discourse analysis." It was, as a matter of fact, this research which led to the work of Noam Chomsky later set forth in his monograph *Syntactic Structures*, the seedbed of transformation grammar. I rather think that we already have available the material from which sound

materials can be prepared for teaching the writing of what Fries calls sequence sentences, that is, good sequential discourse. If so, then the various research and curriculum development projects now under way may well create during the next few years the teaching materials for classroom use in composition improvement. Some findings in the current research of those psychologists working in what is known as psycholinguistics seem to promise future help from that interdisciplinary area. From them we may be learning a great deal about the psychological effect of words and word groups. Future students may have available much keener insights into the relationship between writer and reader.

Some Implications

Here I can recapitulate. I have tried to point out that linguistics and composition are two different entities. One is a descriptive science; the other is a skill—or art, if you will. But there is a common territory, the sentence. Linguistics proper deals with the sentence as the largest structure it is now capable of dealing with in terms of its rigorous techniques of analysis. On the sentence level this analysis is called syntax. But composition traditionally deals with the sentence, as a meaningful unit, as the smallest element with which it concerns itself in the process of putting words together to communicate. Linguistics, as a descriptive procedure, can provide certain data of value to the teacher and student of composition. It can create new insights into the structure of the English sentence and hence enable the student to use the higher potential of that structure in his own writing. Furthermore, even though the domain of linguistics proper does stop at the end of the sentence, yet its concepts and some of its analysis are relevant to the development of certain desirable qualities in the writing of connected discourse, especially the quality of coherence.

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